S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000593

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA
ALSO FOR IO A/S BRIMMER
P FOR DRUSSELL, RRANGASWAMY
DRL/NESA FOR WHITMAN
OVP FOR HMUSTAFA
USUN FOR WOLFF/GERMAIN/SCHEDLBAUER
NSC FOR SHAPIRO, MCDERMOTT
DOD/OSD FOR FLOURNOY/KAHL/DALTON

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/23/2019
TAGS: OVIP PREL PGOV PTER PINR UNSC KPAL SY IS IRLE
SUBJECT: LEBANON: VICE PRESIDENT BIDEN ASSURE SLEIMAN: NO
DEALS AT LEBANON'S EXPENSE

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Vice President Joe Biden visited Lebanon on May 22,
the first visit by a U.S vice president since 1983. Regional
peace talks topped the agenda of his meeting with President
Michel Sleiman, including the issue of Palestinian refugees
in Lebanon and the roles of both Syria and Iran. Biden
repeatedly stressed that the United States would not make
deals at Lebanon's expense, and that an independent, stable
and secure Lebanon was a precondition for peace in the
region. Lebanon's June 7 parliamentary elections therefore
would be a critical indicator of whether Lebanon would move
in this direction, the Vice President said. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) Vice President Joe Biden visited Lebanon on May 22,
his first visit to the Middle East since taking office. His
first stop was Baabda Palace, where he first held a small
meeting with Lebanese President Sleiman, accompanied by
Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs
Jeffrey Feltman. He then held an expanded meeting that
included the Ambassador, National Security Advisor to the
Vice President Antony Blinken, Principal Deputy Assistant
Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs
Joseph McMillan, Senior Advisor to the Vice President for the
Middle East and South Asia Herro Mustafa, National Security
Council Director for Syria, Lebanon and North Africa Meaghen
McDermott, and Embassy notetaker on the U.S. side, and
Foreign Minister Fawzi Salloukh, Lebanese Ambassador to the
U.S. Antoine Chedid, Diplomatic Advisor Naji Abi Assi,
Director General Elie Assaf, Military Advisor General
Abdulmuttale Hannaoui, Secretary General Dr. Antoine
Choucair, and Chief of the Press Office Adib Abi Akl on the
Lebanese side.

REGIONAL PEACE TOPS AGENDA

¶3. (C) The Vice President told President Sleiman that
President Obama had asked him to come to Beirut to express
U.S. support for Lebanon. Noting Lebanon's June 7
parliamentary elections, Biden also stressed the importance
of the overall bilateral relationship, and reassured Sleiman
that there would be no compromise on Lebanon. Sleiman

expressed his appreciation for U.S. support, thanking him for his visit, President Obama's April letter to him, Secretary Clinton's April 26 visit to Lebanon, as well as continuing U.S. assistance to Lebanese institutions, especially the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF).

¶4. (S) On regional peace efforts, the Vice President relayed in the smaller meeting that President Obama believed the Arab Peace Initiative (API) announced in Beirut contained good elements. The U.S. is committed to a two-state solution and a comprehensive peace, he said. President Obama had made this clear to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu during the two leaders' May 18 meeting in Washington, and had told Netanyahu that Israeli settlements, including tenders and natural growth, must stop. Biden added that the U.S. hoped Lebanon would be part of a comprehensive peace, when the time is right. Peace and security in the region was not possible without a strong, secure and independent Lebanon, he stressed, commending Sleiman for his personal courage in this regard.

¶5. (C) Biden observed that Iran had changed the focus in the region, with many Arab states and Israel increasingly concerned about Iran's behavior. This presented both a new opportunity for peace and a new sense of urgency. He stressed that in its dialogue with Syria and Iran, the U.S. would not do anything to "sell out" Lebanese interests, reaffirming that the U.S. would continue to support Lebanese sovereignty, the LAF, and a free, open political system in Lebanon. "We will stand with you," he said.

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¶6. (S) Sleiman welcomed the Vice President's assurances, as well as U.S. engagement with Syria, which he said was in Lebanon's interest. Syria holds many cards in the Arab-Israeli conflict, he said, and has influence in Iraq and even Iran. He argued that it was best to start with Syria, expressing his conviction that Syrian President Asad sought better relations with the U.S. and was ready to discuss all issues, according to a "pre-approved plan." Syria also had influence over Hizballah and "thousands" of armed Palestinians in Lebanon. The Vice President agreed, and again stressed that U.S. talks with Syria would not come at Lebanon's expense.

LARGER MEETING FOCUSES
ON PALESTINIAN PROBLEM,
REGIONAL PEACE

¶7. (C) In the expanded meeting, Sleiman reiterated his appreciation for U.S. support for Lebanon, as well as the openness that the new U.S. administration had demonstrated from the start for the region. Lebanon had no fear that the U.S. would make a deal at Lebanon's expense, he said, and looked forward to a "fair peace" that takes into account Lebanon's interests. Sleiman also welcomed Senator Mitchell's appointment as Special Envoy, noting his Lebanese origins.

¶8. (C) Sleiman highlighted the problem of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, commenting that the Lebanese constitution excluded their permanent resettlement ("tawteen") in Lebanon. Noting the large numbers of Lebanese living abroad, including the U.S., Sleiman argued that these individuals had more right to Lebanese nationality than the 400,000 Palestinians in Lebanon.

¶9. (C) Furthermore, he continued, these Palestinian refugees were a major problem for Israel as well as Lebanon. Palestinian efforts to liberate Israel had led to civil war in Lebanon and Israeli occupation of south Lebanon, which in turn had created various militia groups, with Hizballah emerging as the most important. After 30 years, the LAF was now present in the south, following Hizballah's 2006 war with

Israel, but for this "experiment" to succeed, a regional peace needed to be established.

¶10. (C) Sleiman said Lebanon adhered to the Arab Peace Initiative as the only way to reach peace. "The opportunity is there for peace," he said, because all Arab countries now agreed on the Arab Peace Initiative, although he warned that is unity would not last. Lebanon was therefore seeking U.S. support in sponsoring negotiations on outstanding issues. Lebanon would attend any meeting based on the principles of the Arab Peace Initiative and Madrid and Annapolis initiatives, he said, and was looking forward to hearing more about Russia's plans to hold a peace conference.

¶11. (C) The Vice President stressed U.S. support for an independent, secure Lebanon with strong institutions and free of outside influence. Lebanon had a central role to play in peace efforts, he said, which it can and needs to play to be part of the solution. This was why Lebanon was his first Middle East stop as Vice President. The U.S. administration was committed to reaching a comprehensive peace, and had communicated to countries in the region, including Israel and Syria, its support for the Arab Peace Initiative.

¶12. (C) The Vice President said both the Israelis and Arabs must meet minimum requirements. Thus far, he said, there has been lots of rhetoric but not a lot of action. The United States was looking for action. Biden reaffirmed U.S. commitment to a two-state solution, between "equal and independent" states. Recalling his May 5 AIPAC speech, he reiterated that there needed to be a "real freeze" on Israeli settlements, including on natural expansion.

¶13. (C) Biden also noted that both Lebanon and Israel still needed to fulfill many of the requirements under UNSCR 1701,

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including the dismantling of militias, demarcation of borders, the arms embargo, and Israeli overflights. Sleiman complained about new Israeli violations in the form of "spy rings" in Lebanon, in addition to its continued "occupation" of Shebaa Farms and "daily violations" of Lebanese air space. He hoped that Special Envoy Mitchell would focus not only on Palestinian-Israel issues, but also on Lebanon-Syria.

¶14. (C) The Vice President assured Sleiman that the United States understood that Arab unity on the Arab Peace Initiative might not last, and that this was another reason the U.S. wanted to move quickly to reach a regional peace. However, he again stressed that no initiative would trade away Lebanon's interests. On the contrary, Lebanon's independence, sovereignty, and security (including a strong LAF) were an "essential precondition to peace in the region."

¶15. (C) Lebanon's June 7 parliamentary elections could be a strong first step forward toward strengthening Lebanon's stability, institutions, and borders, the Vice President continued. The U.S. hoped to see free, open and fair elections that led to a governing program that focused on building the strength of Lebanese institutions, especially the LAF and the presidency, Conversely, a move in the opposite direction would make things "exponentially" more difficult, he warned.

¶16. (C) Sleiman said Lebanon's parliamentary elections would be transparent, but he expected the results to be close. Regardless of whether the "moderates" or "hard-liners" won, he said this winner would be responsible for governing in cooperation with the opposition, with the President overseeing the overall process.

¶17. (C) Sleiman ended the meeting thanking the Vice President and his delegation for the visit and sending a message to President Obama that the Arabs were expecting much from him. "Peace today is better than peace later," he said.

¶18. (C) The Office of the Vice President has cleared this message.

SISON